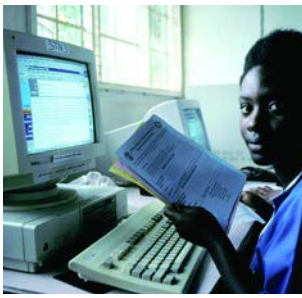
Research Influence on Public Policy: A Case Study

Bridging the Digital Divide

Information and communications technologies take hold in Uganda

In the last decade, Uganda faced a problem in its efforts to bridge the digital divide. It needed to find a way to interest women in using computers – women who have little or no reading ability. Acting on information collected from women living near the Nakaseke telecentre, the International Women's Tribune Centre responded with a simple program that doesn't require a keyboard and speaks to the women in their own language. Support from IDRC's Acacia Program Initiative enabled the IWTC to develop its graphic-voice interface CD-ROM, "Ideas for Rural Women Earning Money." Using browser software, the program allows users to move the mouse across the screen and click on pictures or text and then hear the information in their own language, Luganda.



Acacia's first five-year phase, approved by the International Development Centre (IDRC) in 1997, was one of the first major donor-supported initiatives in Africa to promote information and communications technologies (ICTs) for community development, especially among the poor and disadvantaged. The importance of policy frameworks linked to research was acknowledged, as well as the need for demonstration models that could inform public policy initiatives. Over the years, Acacia has invested more than CA $40 million in research, demonstration, and evaluation projects on key ICT issues (www.idrc.ca/acacia).

In 2001, IDRC undertook an evaluation of the public policy influence of some of the research it supported, including the Acacia Program in Uganda, Senegal, Mozambique, and South Africa. In all four countries, political stability and a government committed to modernization and searching for effective new development methods provided opportunities for policy influence. Dr Zenda Ofir, who carried out the Uganda evaluation, describes IDRC's policy influence efforts there as "a longer, slower, and more winding relay race" than in the other three countries because of "its greater number of policy role players."

The Ugandan context

Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world. Most of its 22 million people live in rural areas, and 55% live below the poverty line. In 1986, as the country emerged from two decades of turmoil and trauma under various destructive political regimes, the Ugandan government and people were committed to developing and modernizing their country. Key government officials were exposed to the concept of the Information Society, and this was enhanced by the expertise of Ugandans abroad or returning from exile. They brought new ideas and methods into the country, including knowledge of ICTs.

The telecommunications sector was reformed and liberalized, donor organizations were encouraged to engage in the ICT arena, and a dynamic private sector wanted to use ICTs for business development. Local institutional and individual ICT champions from government, academic, private, and nongovernmental sectors were advocates and raised awareness. This was supported by effective and accurate media information.

By 1994, various voices had started calling for a national policy that could help create an enabling environment for ICTs. In 1996, the Ugandan government embarked on extensive reform of the telecommunications sector. This included

restructuring the formerly state-owned monopoly, creating an independent regulatory agency, privatizing and introducing competition in the industry, and licensing multiple operators. A year later, the Communications Act was passed, aimed at increasing telephone use, improving telecommunications facilities, and opening the market to a variety of new services. The Act also provided for a Rural Communications Development Fund to help provide services across the country.

Uganda was represented at various ICT conferences during the mid-1990s. At the *First Global Knowledge Conference* in Toronto in 1997, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni made a political commitment to ICTs and invited the international community to assist in applying ICTs and traditional knowledge systems to the development of his country. A year later, Uganda sent one of the largest delegations to the *Global Connectivity for Africa Conference*.

By 1998, a number of governments and international institutions had indicated their support for the development of ICTs in Uganda. With their funding of projects and studies and partnerships with local organizations, they had the potential to exert an extensive influence over policy-making processes. They were also well accepted by the government and had access to the highest level decision-makers.

The cellphone revolution

Cellphones revolutionized Uganda's communications industry. The first network went live in early 1995. In the next six years the number of mobile subscribers grew from 3 500 to 276 000. "Mobile communication thus filled the communications vacuum," says Dr Ofir. "It made it possible for users to make a call almost anywhere, at any time, at an affordable price. This had a profound effect on the economy; it increased productivity and simplified the lives of businesspeople, farmers, public servants, and others. People were suddenly much more aware of the potential effect that ICT could have on their development."

The number of private computer vendors and Internet service providers (ISPs) had also been growing rapidly. By 2000 there were already nine ISPs but most provided access exclusively in Kampala. Public access to relevant technologies outside the capital remained scarce – mainly some Internet cafes and private or NGO-managed telecentres.

Meanwhile, the private sector pressured the government to promote ICTs for business use. In an effort to jump-start the economy, the Uganda Investment Authority identified ICTs as a priority area for economic development. One of the recommendations presented to the government was that it formulate a national ICT policy and create an implementing body.

In Uganda, many individuals and organizations from different sectors championed ICT development. Dr Ofir names the president himself as one of the first champions, along with Communications Minister John Nasasira who has been lauded by several people interviewed for IDRC's evaluation as *the* visionary in government and the country during early efforts to promote ICTs. Key institutional champions, especially in those years, were the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and Makerere University's Institute of Computer Science.

Dr Ofir states: "Although ICT development in Uganda was built on a wave of local interest in the academic and private sectors, international and local development agencies also played an important role in stimulating an awareness of the information society and the potential role of the new technologies in development." The early IDRC-supported studies and stakeholder workshops, together with other early ICT initiatives such as the establishment of telecentres, are credited by many as having been instrumental in mobilizing the interest of the Ugandan government.

Acacia in Uganda

The first Ugandan Acacia initiatives were launched in 1997. An action plan was drawn up covering four areas: policy, infrastructure and technology, human resources, and content. The initial Acacia activities were "intended to sensitize decision-makers, policy designers, and opinion leaders and enlist their support for the use and application of ICTs for rural community development." In addition to establishing a Steering Committee (later the National Acacia Advisory Committee) and National Secretariat, the program supported a number of projects over the next five years.

Dr Ofir points out that one way of influencing policymakers was to expose them to pilot projects. The oldest telecentre, Nakaseke, known for its level of community ownership, proved a popular choice. More recent Acacia-supported projects focused on exploring the expansion of the role of telecentres by promoting local content and language, as well

as the role of telecentres and ICTs in areas such as promotion of women's development, agriculture, education, health, and small business development. The CD-ROM *Ideas for Rural Women Earning Money* was launched at Nakaseke and has apparently had a great impact on women using the telecentre.

IDRC's main technical assistance was to support international ICT experts to help carry out policy studies, says Dr Ofir. Acacia chose to support two distinct types of research in Uganda. It commissioned studies to provide background information and answers to specific policy questions, such as those conducted to inform the Rural Communications Development Policy process, the telecentre baseline studies, and four studies initially commissioned in 1998 to examine the status of ICTs in Uganda. It also supported action research in the telecentre projects, usually in the form of monitoring and evaluation. In discussions with participants and from project reports, Dr. Ofir determined that the telecentres contributed to the policy processes primarily by raising key policy issues and sensitizing decision-makers to the use of multipurpose telecentres for rural development.

Findings

Dr Ofir points out that the timing of IDRC's entry into the ICT development arena in Uganda – when a policy window was opening – provided the Centre with an excellent opportunity to influence relevant policy initiatives. IDRC focused on demonstration projects, processes, and events that could provide lessons leading to policy influence. This enhanced its credibility among Ugandans as a supportive, sincere organization. Its early establishment and promotion of telecentres as a concept "provided a crucible of information" from which ideas could be obtained and lessons learned – for example the critical need for good management, ownership, and sustainability mechanisms. It also focused government and public attention on the concept of universal, rural access to ICTs.

Acacia's funding of two ICT policy development processes enabled IDRC to have "an immediate and quite significant policy influence in the ICT field," Ofir concludes. And the integrated nature of Acacia, with funding allocated for community-based projects as well as projects related to policy implementation, enhanced the opportunities for policy influence.

The idea takes hold

As awareness and support of ICTs grew in Uganda within government, the private sector, and development agencies, more organizations entered the ICT policy arena, Dr Ofir reveals. The government developed its own strong focus on relevant policy development.

Acacia continued to play a significant yet supportive role, primarily by funding the two key policy processes. Acacia projects helped women to understand the role ICTs could play in their development; helped to make people aware of the importance of local content and language within the ICT sector; and stimulated application in the agricultural, education, and health sectors. "It is likely that these experiences, if well documented and systematically researched, will play an important role in future policy development activities," adds Dr Ofir.

This implies that, at this time, IDRC was no longer a pioneer, but continued to make contributions recognized by others as important, albeit as part of a wave of ICT developments.

Lessons learned from the Acacia experience in Uganda point to a need to clearly define roles for partner organizations. Acacia's impact could have been further enhanced if the National Acacia Advisory Committee had better determined its role in relation to the UNCST/Acacia Secretariat and to IDRC. Early ELSA contributions and results could also have strengthened the research components. Dr Ofir also remarks that more time could have been spent on the development of gender-sensitive strategies for the various Acacia activities.

Dr Ofir concludes: "A study of the *intended* policy influence of the four Acacia projects indicates that all the *intended* policy influence activities were undertaken – and more – and that they provided good opportunities and mechanisms for policy influence. However, there were many players in the ICT policy arena in Uganda and each of them had the potential to exert some measure of policy influence. The *extent* to which the IDRC policy influence activities had been effective therefore remains quite difficult to determine. Policy influence is notoriously difficult to trace; it is often impossible to claim that a particular policy decision has been taken because of a certain influence. In many cases the "percolation of information and ideas" provides a context within which policy decisions are taken.

This brief was prepared by Maureen Johnson based on a case study by Zenda Ofir.

For more information: Evaluation Unit
International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9

Tel: (613) 236-6163
Email: evaluation@idrc.ca
Web: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

She adds: "IDRC has made major contributions [. . .] through its research activities. There is a need for greater emphasis on systematic, long-term policy research and on the building of this capacity in the country."

Evaluating IDRC's influence on ICT policy

IDRC was one of the first organizations to recognize and address ICTs as a priority area for African development. It was also one of the few international agencies prepared to allocate funding toward establishing ICTs on the African continent in the 1990s. Acacia's first five-year phase, approved by IDRC in 1997, promoted ICTs for community development, especially among the poor and disadvantaged. The importance of policy frameworks linked to research was acknowledged, as well as the need for demonstration models that could inform public policy initiatives.

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All the governments were relatively new, with most having come to power after long periods of turmoil and instability. They were thus actively seeking solutions to the development needs of their people, using among others, donor support to achieve their objectives. Key government officials, including ministers, were aware — or being made aware — of the opportunities presented by ICTs.

The early emphasis on feasibility and background research studies, as well as the establishment of pilot projects, laid the groundwork for an integrated, multipronged approach to the Acacia strategies in each country. The approaches were similar and provided significant policy influence potential.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy